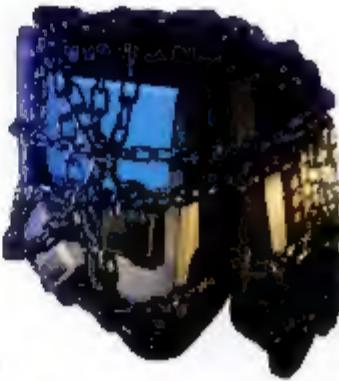




Foto: R. T. F.



CYBER THRASH

Everyone thinks that they're nerds, but these teenage beer-guzzling hackers in their Megadeth t-shirts are the new heroes of the information age.

Even o'clock Saturday night, and I was holed up for the DMZ again. I had a feeling the Big Kahuna would be there—and that he'd know what the hell was going on with the Cardboard Box. I was didn't, and it was making me nervous.

On the TV set outside my slim Brooklyn bedroom, the Cold War was ending. Fusion Czech gathered in plazas, East Germans oiled West Berlin shop windows—great infotainment, if you like rubble. I was after a different story. No broken pixels, no ragged eyebrows, just platinum signals playing hide-and-seek through a fiber-optic maze that plattered across the world. On the TV screen the present was crumpling into the past. On my computer screen a future was taking shape, and the Big Kahuna was somewhere inside it.

Amber glow brightened the room as I fired up my basement IBM clone and dialed into Telenet. The modem shrieked and crackled and

Article by Julian Gibbell

suddenly I was in, gliding down the Main Street of the world's computer networks. I typed in a series of numbers charging the call to a hulking defense contractor somewhere in the Midwest, then I entered the 12-digit network-user address that routed my connection across the Atlantic to a PC in France.

The cursor sat juddering for a moment, then slid across the screen, spelling out the welcome logo: big block letters D, M, and Z. I entered a handle and dropped on in. It was the usual scene. A chat system capable of taking 25 callers at once, the DMZ was a hangout for hackers and phone phreaks from all over the world. A list of their handles glowed out at me from my monitor; silent and serene, but behind it a phreak/hack Cthulhu roared. All those handles were passing private messages back and forth, rating deals, reading the short-lived codes, passwords, and other digitized bits of information that are the digital tender of the hacker economy.

But I wasn't here to cop. I was here to find the Big Kukuna, and he was nowhere in sight. The list of handles glowed on, luring at adding a mere now and then.

There was nothing to do but wait.

In France I Walk in France for a kid who lived an arms' code away from me! Things had gotten weird so fast I'd barely noticed.

To begin the walk was all as simple as a handshake. On October 4, 1989, Grumman Aerospace Corporation, a key supplier of combat aircraft to the Pentagon, sent police to arrest a 15-year-old boy for slipping into the Von Braun missile at Grumman's Long Island plant from his basement in Levittown, New York.

It wasn't much, just another hacker story in a year brimming with them. The biggest was on its way to court: Robert T. Morris Jr., who had foisted a worm into the defense department's national research network, unintentionally paralyzing over 6,000 computers, faced five years and a \$250,000 fine. Earlier in the year a federal judge had sentenced 16-year-old Herbert Zinn Jr., aka "Shadow Hawk," to nine months in prison plus a \$10,000 fine and two and a half years' probation for sneaking into phone company systems and copying "highly sensitive" software. On the folk tour circuit, computer-security hero Clifford Stoll was out plugging *The Cuckoo's Egg*, his nonfiction account of KGB-hacked West German hackers swooping for success in American networks.

Nineteen eighty-nine was shaping up into the year of the hacker, and I wanted a piece of it the way some people wanted a piece of the Berlin wall. I'd been getting more obsessed with computers every day since I bought my PC, and more fed up with writing record reviews. As things were, the Grumman bust was small potatoes, but by the conventions of the emerging media subgenre of the hacker story, it had the earmarks of a minor classic: crime, punishment, info, money, *überwelt*. I wanted to write it.

Looking for dirt, I opened up the latest issue of 2600, "The Hacker Quarterly," a long island-based 'zine. It was filled with how-to briefs, updates on worldwide hacker fests and lairs, and a tough, political-minded defense of hacking and its economic companion, phone phreaking (the high-tech deconstruction of Ma Bell). No mention of Grumman, though.

But hidden among all the other goodies was a list of computer bulletin boards for BBSs) loosely affiliated with the magazine. I switched on the PC, called one of the numbers—a Watchtower machine—and learned a lot.

I'd been riding the tri-state boards for over a year, and at first I didn't see anything so different about this one. There was the usual pile of messages, friendly exchanges and occasional swaps, points of information and warez. Subjects ranged from politics and music to personal-computer tech—with some notable add-ons, including general discussions of hacking and phreaking. But as the packed messages scrolled up my screen I could see that the tone here was unusual in the generally conservative world of BBSs. Talk was looser here, more anarchic, people used handles rather than real names and actually swore without fear of getting banished by the folks who ran the board, the sysops (systems operators). There was a muted festivity to the place, as if somewhere nearby, maybe in a back room no one would tell me about, one motherfucker of a party was going on.

But there was nothing on the Grumman beat, as I scoured through the section devoted to bashing other BBSs. There were some well-pitched appeals for calls, but the ad that caught my eye only needed to Long Island area code to bait the hook:

**#044#00 from the Wintermute @ 1038PM
Call: The Cardboard Box, 500-740-0000**

My computer dialed the number, the modem connected, and then suddenly I was facing the heaviest dose of paranoia I'd ever encountered on a board. The BBS program asked for my handle (Dr. Blomley) and then slapped me with a questionnaire asking me to (a) declare that I was not an employee of any long-distance phone company or any local, state, or federal law enforcement agency, (b) identify a series of cryptic technical terms and acronyms, and (c) leave a note to the sysop, Wintermute, and his coyopsa X25 Warrior and the Big Kukuna, describing some of my hacking exploits. I passed the first part with flying colors, bulldozed my way miserably through the second, and concluded in the third that my greatest exploit was subscribing to 2600. So much for that board. After a performance they'd never let me in, I was back to square one.

A few days later I checked the board to see whether I'd been validated. I thumbed through the log-in procedure and waited for the brush-off. It didn't come—I'd been granted full access. I was in.

I cut straight to the message base and worked my way down the menu. The e-mail section was unresolvable, nothing but private messages. The PIRREAKING section was full of phone company techno-tale and strange tales of making pay phones

do things they weren't designed to. In HACKING the message listed phone numbers and passwords for all kinds of computers—university, corporate, NASA. PIRATES LAIR was the "waves" section, a place to trade illegally copied commercial software. In CARDING there were messages on how to scan other people's credit card numbers and use them safely. The more I read, the wider my eyes bulged. Whoever these people were—the Signal Hackers, Den Hackroyd, Exile—they were hardcore.

I shook my amusement and headed for the HACKING NEWS/BUSTS section. A good idea: the second message that scrolled up brought the news of the Grumman bust to the board, and in the third Wintermute dropped the bomb that the unnamed混蛋 in the papers, on TV, or the radio, was most likely A-TNT, until recently a regular at the box. With this the conversation quickly heated up. How could they be sure it was him? Would he react? Would they trust the board? As the days and messages scrolled by, though, it became clear that the board was safe, and the questions grew more philosophical. For instance: was A-TNT, or was he not, a lame?

Lameass, if memory was the ultimate sin around here, and not everybody was sure A-TNT was guilty.

"He wasn't such a bad guy. He was just getting started," wrote the Mechanic. "It's a new board."

"People get busted because they eat frogs," Mirage suggested.

But the Watchman wasn't going for it: "Sorry... Sorry... I don't see much difference. If you make a mistake you're lame. So we're all lame to an extent... but, whether you're the old TeSt hacker or the lameass Miller 4000, it takes a BBS fuck-up to get busted."

Whatever A-TNT was, though, he was wasn't the whiz kid the media was calling him. "Shit, he was asking ME for help," cracked the Mechanic. "So you KNOW he's smart? No seriously?" but what else was new? The media got it wrong again. Pretty soon the little lame would be on "Geraldo," reporting on his evil ways, highlighting the old folks with tales of snakes-worshipping, skinhead hacker cults.

"Why is it when you use a computer user is PV it always seems like fucking master-slave?" asked the Watchman, clearly pissed off. "Why don't they ever show computer users like us, chewing Buds and shooting on Marijuana 4000 in their basement 24-hours and hacking with stink?"

I was starting to wonder myself. The moment I stepped in here I knew I had found that back-room party at last. These people were having the time of their adolescent lives, and they were doing it with enough style and attitude to qualify for full-fledged MTV-sanctioned youth subculture status. All right, so maybe A-TNT wasn't a famer, but who wanted to read another morality play about a computer delinquent scared straight by a brush with the law. The real story was still on the loose, and I was starting right it.

The only problem was that a mountain of hacker paranoia was standing between me and the story. There are good reasons trust is such a hard-won and fragile commodity down in the computer underground. Since the binary "War Games" days of the early 80s, the federal and state governments have criminalized the shit out of hacking—by last year every state butенко Vermont had passed laws against computer trespassing and "bush" and the



Federal Computer Fraud and Abuse Act of 1986 had made hacking punishable by anywhere from one to 20.

After a brief period of relative impunity, hackers were beginning to go to jail. That kind of atmosphere tightens definitions of common sense. On boards around the country, the elite hacker group Legion of Doom was circulating a novice's guide that warned against leaving your real phone number on any BBS ("no matter how lo-rad it seems") or sharing real-life information with any one you didn't know too well.

"Don't be afraid to be paranoid," the guide concluded. "Remember, you are breaking the law. It doesn't hurt to store everything encrypted on your hard disk, or keep your notes buried in the backscatter in the trunk of your car. You may feel a little funny, but you'd feel a lot funnier when you meet Bruno, your transvestite computer who axed his family to death."

Still, I got the feeling that even if the dangers didn't exist at all, hackers would have to invent some. The main thrill of the hack may indeed be, as the LOD intro insists, "the pursuit and capture of knowledge," but paranoia is a big part of the kick. As the pop culture industry is quick to recognize (see humor-writer Chat Day's new book *The Hacker* for a deliciously schlocky tale of an elite hacker board infiltrated not by the feds but by a terrorizing dyno-

Pretty soon the little lamer would be on "Geraldo," repenting of his evil ways, frightening the old folks with tales of sneaker- worshipping skinhead hacker cults.

headed "The Succubus"), the technology just lends itself to cloak-and-dagger drama.

So it wouldn't do for me to start asking pesky-inquisitor questions. If I speckled the pheahackers who populated the place they might scatter, leaving me with the blood of a dead BBS on my hands. I decided to approach the sysops instead. On my computer I carefully composed a text-file suggesting we meet and explaining my intentions and my sympathy towards hackers. Then I called the Box, uploaded the text to Wintermute in the private file-transfer section, logged off, and crossed my fingers.

I called back the next day, alternately rushing as soon as I saw that I had private mail from the sysops. But it was only a message acknowledging that they'd received the file. I called back again the following day. No answer. I called later in the week. Still nothing.

My nerves were frazzling, but at least the waiting gave me time to browse the message bases and get a better picture of the board. Slowly I began to figure out what any seasoned member of the computer underground would have sussed at first glance: the Cardboard Box was not to be confused with a pirate board. This was a hack/phreak board, dedicated primarily to the mutual education of its members in the arts of second-story telecommunications. According to Northern Illinois University

criminologist Gordon Meyer (I downloaded his master's thesis from the Box's database), there are roughly a hundred such boards in existence, varying widely in quality (the wares boards, where uploading and downloading pirated software is the main activity, outnumber the hip's by about 20 to one).

I also got to know the players. There was the Fene Ranger who called in regularly from Chicago to rant about the lameness of "variez d'ODds." There were one or two other out-of-staters, and occasionally someone would drop in from England or Switzerland. The rest of the 20 or so regulars were spread out between Long Island and far Manhattan—not a huge area, but diverse. When Manila, an inner-city caller of color, referred to A-TNT with the generic "nigga," he got back a clueless explanation from the "burban Big Kahuna to the effect that the kid didn't appear to be black in any of the pictures he'd seen. In the obligatory MUSIC section, similar culture clashes flared and fizzled—the Mechanic, calling from the heart of the Boogie Down Bronx, went toe-to-toe with the metalheads and prog-rockers for a while in fuck-you defenses of hip hop, house, and reggae. Then he gave up in a confession of secret love for Genesis and Phil Collins.

I was learning all kinds of things. Except why the sysops weren't responding to my letter. A week had passed since I uploaded it. I called again, planning to leave another anxious, muggy message. Instead, there it was. Contact:

FROM: WINTERMUTE
TO: DR. BOMBRY
SUBJECT: ARTICLE...
A REPLY TO #338

DRB... Wait... OK I might be able to manage me X25 Warlord and Big Kahuna meeting you (sorry we can't give out addresses or phone #s) ... I have a few conditions... don't use any real handles or board names... etc... etc... I would appreciate it if you would say clearly that hackers don't destroy anything on a system, they just want to learn how to use it... etc... etc... A contribution to the BBS for a 30,000 BROAD modem would be appreciated!

I didn't kick my heels because there wasn't room under my desk. I just sent Wintermute a message saying I didn't think SPIN would cough up modern-money but the other conditions would be no problem.

After all, why help clean up the hackers' public image? It was sad but true enough that the "threat" of computer viruses has obsessed the media, which had in general been too lazy to find out that in the hack/phreak community planting a destructive virus was something you might do to a rival bulletin board but never to a hacked system. And why wouldn't the media call bullshit on corporate claims of huge losses to the computer underground? The software industries were claiming they lost billions of dollars a year to piracy. The phone companies claimed a million a day bleed to phreaking. No one ever pointed out that they were talking about "thief" of goods that didn't disappear from the shelves when stolen and would not have been used anyway if they had to be paid for. Information technology had a tendency to make us

information peddlers—journalists like me—look stupid, and it was hardly fair that hackers suffered for our lameness.

So sure, I would gladly do what I could to make amends. I told Wintermute—as long as we could meet and talk. "Just give me a time and place," I said.

Another long week passed. Finally I got this message:

FROM: WINTERMUTE
TO: DR. BOMBRY
SUBJECT: ARTICLE...
A REPLY TO #338

I am having problems... Nobody wants to meet you, they think you are gonna answer with a dozen caps or something...

For Christ's sake, I sighed and typed out a reply:

FROM: DR. BOMBRY
TO: WINTERMUTE
SUBJECT: ARTICLE...
A REPLY TO #341

What would it take to convince you I'm not a merc? What do you want? My American Express card number so you guys can kick my life up if I double cross you? I don't know. This is a little depressing. I mean, I only have about half a story if I can't meet with anybody. What would it take?

The next day's e-mail brought this:

FROM: WINTERMUTE
TO: DR. BOMBRY
SUBJECT: ARTICLE...
A REPLY TO #348

DRB... If we wanted your PDAEX # we would have it already... As soon as I tell to Kahuna we will call you and see what happens...

T he bravado was gangsta-movie perfect. I had to laugh.

But nobody called. After a couple days I logged onto the Box again and got a message from Big Kahuna asking for my social security number. I thought about it; I'd already given them my real name and real phone number. What more could they do with the SS#? I typed it in. Then I downloaded some bedtime reading from the board's library of text-files and logged off.

I could have picked better bedtime reading. The file I'd leached turned out to contain two brief Newsweek articles by a reporter named Richard Sandca. The first recounted his undercover adventures as "Montana Wildhack" on hack/phreak boards around the country. The second described the hacker response to the first story after it appeared: Sandca was vilified throughout the hacker world, inundated with crank calls, and found his credit history fucked with and his card numbers posted all over the BBS nation. Not a soothing tale. I managed to convince myself that the reason he had caught so much hell was that he had used real board names and handles. Even so, there was no telling what might piss off some small group of hackers.

somewhere and set me up for the same batch of a letter. I went to sleep very tired given up my social security number.

Four days later I called the agent. E-mail the Big Kahuna had discovered my address. Big deal. They already had my name and phone number; they could have gotten the address out of the phone book. I dashed off a quick dis and moved on to the next letter waiting for me. It went a little something like this:

FROM: GUNTERMUTH
TO: DR. SOMBER
SUBJECT: CHECK THIS SHIT OUT

Y365 - PROCEED
ADM CIRRELL, ALVIR

*CIRRELL, ALVIR SINCE 1988
#F01 H1889 FH-302 TAPE RPTD 2000
+SUM-081889-1019, FRCN-HO-NFB-HD,
PCTS2, HCSD-A70, 2-DONES.
*H1889 CODE RPTD DPDG HIC TRANS 2000
#D 30/10/90 HIR ARREACOUNT NO
0119080259 10189 0888 401499 00
00 00 00 3719255235700
02 19080259 0888 0888 0 0 00 00
00 10 3719255498900
END OF REPORT

My mouth flapped open. It was brief and pathetic, but it was my credit history, and my American Express card numbers phrased in its model like a pair of hot rhinestones. This should only have intensified my fears of a few nights earlier, but all I felt was a mixture of astonishment and admiration.

My hands gripped the keyboard to enter a reply. I didn't know what to say. Suddenly the cursor popped out of my control and started spelling:

Alviro doc, it said.

In a bedroom or a basement somewhere in the S16 area, Winternesse had broken into that house. I typed back:

—Hi. That is some impressive stuff.
—Hey. It is the big shit... don't worry I might
not your card the off over the place...

We got to talking.

—Um, u mind my asking how old u are?
—Sorry to warm around
—Just being a reporter
—Well... should I make this story dramatic,
and say I am 18 or should I tell you my real
age?
—The truth would be fine
—Um, well... I just turned 16 in September!

Fifteen, Jesus,

—How long the other person?
—With X25 Warner is 24 and Big Kahuna is
16-17 I really don't know
—U guys ever meet in person?
—Yeah... me and the Warner hang out all
the time. As far Kahuna we've never met
—U never met him and you let him run this
business with you? how can you trust him?

—I trust him more than I trust you. I hate and
guitar that...

But he kept talking. He told me hacking was fun, and I should try it. He gave me the numbers of some hacked-out systems in call. This all took a long time. The inner crawled across and down the screen like a maddeningly slow-mo game of Centipede. Two hours later my eyes were bloodshot from staring at the monitor and the conversation was ending on a sour note. My questions had gotten too personal and Winternesse suddenly wanted every detail worth printing off the record. As we had goodbye and signed off I thought it might be the last time I heard from him. I could see the whole story disappearing back into the electronic depths it had emerged from.

I turned off the computer and shuffled out of my bedroom in a daze. On the TV in the kitchen Ted Koppel was announcing the fall of the Berlin Wall. Right now it was history, but in a few weeks big fat AT&T, every phone-hacker's favorite long-distance company, would be using this same footage in ads, as if it had been some basic human urge to telecommunicate that had smacked the wall. They weren't entirely wrong. People were fighting for a handful of things in Eastern Europe, but would anyone truly say that the first circulation of news, stock market prices and music videos were high on the list?

On the TV in the kitchen the nuclear age was completing its transition to the information age. War, peace, commerce, fun—none of these would be the same anymore. It was still possible of course that the new age would turn out to be just a digital remastering of the old one. We would measure the new stockpiles in megabytes rather than megatons, but they'd be stockpiles nonetheless—endless lots of data, bytes and numbers and that power that goes with them. 340, as long as three teenagers on a telecomm provider could pick the corporate lock on those lists, there was a chance things might be different this new round. I might never speak to Winternesse again. But it was reassuring to know he was out there.

Winternesse didn't disappear. In a few days he and the Big Kahuna and the X25 Warner started conference-calling my apartment. I was never home when they called—I'd get in and find a series of extended messages on my machine, those high-pitched adolescent boy voices cracking jokes, chattering among themselves, laughing uncontrollably and making rude comments on me in outgoing message music. It was like the Beastie Boys had taken over my answering machine.

Finally they left a number I could call and leave a voice-message at. They had pirated a voice mailbox. Voicemail is those automated answering-machine systems you get nowadays when you call big firms, and it turns out they are extremely hackable. Find an unused box in the system, hack out its password, and it's years (just plaintext) before karts with salted places to trade phone codes—until somebody at the office discovers your coup and kills the box.

The Tony's Voicemail was still good. I left a tone they could definitely get hold of me. They called back. We talked for two hours. I was full of questions.

Like, what was the point? What did you do since you got inside a television company?

Well first of all you didn't destroy anything. That was rule number one. But that left a lot of room. You could take a look at some pretty interesting things boys claimed that on a NASA computer once they found a report about a fatal crash that never made it to the press. You could also use some systems as gateways to networks bypassing walls between computers. You could even set up a hidden paragon BBS. The Mechanic, they told me, was in the process of doing just that on a Mac hard disk down in New Jersey. But all these things needed the code. The big challenge was getting in. "Once you're in," said the Kahuna, "it's like... Mission. That was her. What need?"

And what were the agents systems and networks to break into?

Well, Arpanet, the defense department's research network, was certainly one of them. Then there were the credit report companies—CR, TRW. There were great ways to get passwords for their computers. One was to go "cracking," poking around in the garbage of a credit database client to see what carelessly discarded passwords might reveal. Another was "social engineering"—calling up database-owners and putting on your best grown-up voice to build a password out of them. If neither of these suited your style, you could always just trade for the passwords with whatever card shiz you might



have—a pile of cables, some VHSes.

And what about the stereotypes of hackers? Why they must proggies?

No, not really. The Kahuna wasn't much in fact, did much better in English. And none of the three knew much about programming. Knowing how to program would be, of course, and the most elite hackers knew at least one programming language, but it wasn't necessary—hacking wasn't a system of rules, it was a craft.

Well, were they losers then? Troubled kids?

Lolz, no—they all had plenty of friends. Kahuna went to parties on the weekends, played a lot of pick-up football. But troubled? Well, they were teenagers. "All my friends are troubled," said the Warner, "and most of them don't have anything about computers."

The boys were sharp. They were funny and in a good teen-boy way they were friendly too. I liked them and I looked forward to their phone calls, which began coming fairly regularly after the first contact. I remained uneasy though. Every time I pushed for a face-to-face meeting, they would

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cagily put me off. My deadline loomed and I still hadn't clinched the story.

It never even occurred to me that they might know the story better than I did, but they did, and they'd been feeding it to me in little doses all along, a studio here, a parliament there. The silly little bastards were trying to show me how easy it was to get hooked on hacking, and they were doing a pretty good job. The rush I got when I first called the DIAZ was called hacking France and didn't pay a penny! It kept me coming back for more. And when I slipped into the Mac hactivist's factory Van, my first actual illegal entry, I suddenly had a glimpse of what it was all about. These were low-grade terrorist butts, sub-warfare DOD activity, but they were hearty enough that I finally understood Wimmerman's uncharacteristically rapturous declarations that he would never give up hacking as long as he lived.

But I still had to meet the boys.

Then one week they didn't call. Caught up in other assignments, I didn't have time to drop by the Jura, but the silence was making me jittery. I was joining in the underground. It couldn't hurt. I decided at the end of the week, to give the board a quick call and see what was up. I switched on the computer and dialed up the Continental Box. There was no answer. That wasn't good. If the hard disk on Wimmerman's computer had failed, it could be hours before he got the board back up. When I called later that night the board was still down. Fuck! Well, it would be back up the next day.

But the next day there was still no answer from the Continental Box. I was reallywright tight. The boys? Were they dead? and I still didn't know any of their home phone numbers. The story was disappearing again. There was only one way left to get in touch with them. It was a long shot, but fuck it, at least it would give me some kind of closure, work it free.

So there I was, eleven o'clock, Saturday night, back in the DMZ again. I'd barged into the Big Kahuna three or four times before. Maybe he'd be there tonight. The list of handles was long, but no Big Kahuna. There was nothing to do but wait.

Which way's so bad. The DMZ was a fun place to hang out. You just sat there and people sent you messages. Occasionally you got a rare one from one of the gay French locals who seemed to draw to the DMZ by its high teenage testosterone count. No doubt their presence flattered the hackers, who in general liked a big joke as much as the best American

adolescent, but the hackers' own approaches didn't seem a lot less pretentious sometimes. "Got any codes?" was the standard opening line. It could spark a nice conversation, but as often as not it led straight to a quick and dirty exchange of digits.

There was a lot of codes-crushing going on that night. I was having a hard time keeping up since I didn't have any in often. Finally I decided to just go ahead and identify myself as a reporter and see what happened. The results were grand: within 10 minutes I was carrying on two full-blown conversations at the same time. One was with Gestapo, a 15-year-old New Age anarchist (heh-heh) from Phoenix. The other was with a guy whose handle identified him as the tycoon of the DMZ, and he was a 28-year-old French-based U.S. Air Force lieutenant colonel whom'd been running the system out of his house for ten years.

Identity theft was even more fluid than regular hacking, since you could log on with any handle you felt like, and then change your handle as often as you wanted to within a single session. I was logged on as "Scramp" at the moment. Last session I was "Scratch," before that I was "Richard Man."

Scramp was getting sleepy. I was sending farewell messages to Gestapo and the tycoon when a message came through from someone tagged Internet, and plainly identified as calling from the USA.

Internet?

"Hi," I typed. "Where u calling from?"

"The USA," came the reply.

"Can. More precisely. Well, this would take care of Internet. LDR HUH. Wait, don't mind the questions. It's my job. I'm a researcher for *PC magazine*.

The reply took a little while to get back to me:

"—Dr Sternbauer?"

"—Big Kahuna?????"

"OH... No this is Wimmerman." HI.

"—OH NO man. Sorry I've been out of touch for so long..."

"—Well, no problem. But you missed it... big shit at the Signal Jack's house with Gruntman especially..."

The news was bad. Sort of. Gruntman's security had traced the Signal Jacker and a number of other local hackers trying to log onto the same Gruntman 'Net that had been A.T.M.'s undoing. And now they were making house calls in the company of Nassau County police officers and an unidentified guy

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with "fed" written all over him. They didn't have a lot to say. The Signal Jockey so it didn't look like they were giving to press charges, but the story didn't end there. The jock's mom knew the Big Kahuna's mom and told her about the visit. After that it didn't take long for Ak and his Karuna to figure out why their son had been spending so much time with his computer, and boy were they pissed. They took his internet away and grounded him for a year.

It got worse. One of the kids Grumann had swooped down on was carrying his Quiet Riot, a board in the neighboring 718 area. Right away the other types pulled the BBS down, and Winternmute, scared shitless Grumann would be coming for him next, took the hit. He wiped all the BBS files off his hard disc and erased the board indefinitely.

The Cardboard Box was dead.

In the week that followed Bush met Gorkhulu in Astoria, and the boys agreed to meet me in Manhattan. It was a strange and beautiful world. The military-industrial complex had succeeded in killing the Cardboard Box, but there was suddenly a good chance it wouldn't survive the century itself. The pansexual national security state was searching to find a new rationale for its undercover

shenanigans, but hacking was already flying in a world in which cover action was nothing more than a game children played. The future was rushing towards us faster than the past could get out of the way.

Appropriately enough, the boys and I agreed to rendezvous in front of a science-fiction bookshop we all knew. The Kahuna wasn't making it alone. He was still under house arrest.

There was some doubt about how we'd recognize each other, but when the time came I spotted them before I'd gotten within two blocks of the bookshop: two sweet faces, slightly chubby generic white teens, working hard at looking incomprehensible. One of them looked like he had a couple of growth spurts to go; both of them had their hands deep in the pant legs of clothes that looked like last year's Christmas presents. I stood up and roared, "Got any cash?" The boys laughed, and we all tried to quickly get over the weirdness of having faces stuck to our names. The short one was the 7.25 Warior, the taller thud kid was Winternmute.

Thank them to lunch. The Warior got a cheeseburger; Winternmute ordered ribs and invited Piggy over. Cake. They cracked jokes with the waitress, awkward and nervous as the same time. We talked about how they

got into hacking, about the superiority of their k-tel Amigas to my leasing IBM, about the Big Kahuna's bad luck. We talked about the Cardboard Box. Neither of them seemed too sorry it was down. It had been going for over a year, a ripe old age for a hardware break-down. And with the modem freed up, Winternmute could do more of his own hacking now, spend hours scanning that entire 800-number exchanges, shit like that.

After lunch we walked around. We looked in computer-store windows, dropped by a megastore shop that sold JBLs. I bought two copies for some friends, the Warior bought one for himself, and Winternmute shopped another.

It was getting late, I'd have to head home soon. "Ole," said Winternmute, "but first you have to do something for us."

"Whatever," I said.

"Well, Ole, we'll give you the money, but um . . ." his face flushed nervously—"Ole, can you buy us a copy of Playboy? The one with Kimberly Conrad on the cover?" The Warior giggled.

We went to three different newsstands looking for that issue, but none of them had it yet. Finally the boys decided they would settle for a copy of Hustler's. I'd never bought alcohol for the underaged before, and

certainly never dreamed the first minors listed it as being capable of altering my credit history, but I didn't think. They waited outside the store while I made the buy.

When I came out we upped the car right there on the street and headed for the subway swigging. We were all grinning like idiots.

At the subway entrance I turned and said goodbye, and the boys walked off. They were going to catch a train, maybe they didn't know. I watched as they made their way past a nearby newsstand. No Kimberly Conrad, but lots of headlines that supposedly added up to the end of history.

From where I stood I looked like the beginning. New struggles were brewing. Information capital was accumulating like crazy, and the gap between the info-haves and the info-haves-not was gaping wider all the time. Sooner or later it would come down to a fight, and whether they knew it or not, kids like the Big Kahuna, the 7.25 Warior and Winternmute were among the first people to be on the right side.

I saw Winternmute take one lastgulp of beer. Then the boys disappeared into the city crowds.

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